

Dynamism of Identity formation of Indian Muslims

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Abstract

The nature and pattern of a society play an important role in creating and shaping a particular identity. But identities are not merely created by society. The relationship between them is in a way of that people do exert considerable choice and influence on their identities. Individual identity is an adaptation to a social context². Identity of an individual may be in tune with their wants and needs. As a religion of rulers Islam got official patronage and reception and it was cleverly used as tool for their power, when and where required. As there was no single theological school, in Islam, generally accepted throughout the Muslim world, sultans were free to accord the views of Ulema independently. The influential sufis and those who posted as *mufti*, *qadi*, *imam*, *faqih*, and *mujtahid* were entertained by the Sultans

Identity is now became a major area of debate in social science. It is a term which reflects multifaceted segments in a society. The interplay of conflicting and competing forces in a society acts a major role in shaping a particular identity of a person/community. In fact its formation is a dialectical social process involving multiple elements and agencies. Identity particularly that of a community, intertwined with a vast array of external and internal social components. It changes, at times unrecognizably, as and when the determining social components—economy, education, worldview—change. In other words, identity is contingent upon occupation, religion, region, language, caste and so on. At the same time it is not something fixed or frozen. Community identity changes in response to external and internal factors since communities do not exist and operate outside a historical matrix.¹The historical changes in the socio cultural context have led to changes in the nature of identity.

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all will influence the identity of a person. The changes in a culture and economy and the political developments that have made over centuries will alter the nature of identity. This is due to the process of adaptation that happened in accordance with these changes and its possibilities. As Romila Thapar said, the communities have in the past been diverse, with multiple identities and the attempt to force them into unchanging, static entities would seem to contradict historical evidence³.

There are many theories regarding with identity, considering it as a composite definition of a self. Having a physical body and interpersonal connections, experiencing reflexive consciousness, and exercising the executive functions of decision-making and self-regulation, self-structures the identity. In that sense, Identity is a set of meaningful definitions that are ascribed or attached to the self, including social roles, reputation, a structure of values and priorities, and a conception of one's potentiality. Actually Identities exist only in societies, which define and organize them⁴. Hence the study on identity is about an individual's relationship to society. To explore the nature of one's Identity, methodology of social science is very important; among this history is quasi-experiment⁵. Because the structural base of an Individual/community's identity can be seen prior to that historical period. Framing of Identities occurred in accordance with the perception of a society. That perception definitely, relies on socio, economic, political and cultural base of that society. Here ideology has a crucial role, because it employs politicized symbols of a person's place in the social order and it represents a strategy for achieving, mastering, and defending one's place⁶.

Muslim identity in India

India had an overseas trade links with Arabs, even before Islam had been established in Arabia. Arabs used to visit the coast of Southern India, which was a link between the ports of South and South East Asia. The ideology of Islam spread over South Asia through these traders and thus by reached India long before the comings of Delhi sultans. From the prehistoric period itself, there was interaction and exchange between the sub-continent and central and western Asia⁷. The contact between Indians and central Asian Turks, Persians and Arabs was a continuous process irrespective of changes in their political economic and religious platform.

Sind was conquered by Muhammad Bin Qasim during 8th century and by early 10th century Punjab was added to the empire of Ghaznavids by Mahmud Ghazni. The successful invasion of Muhammad Ghor led to the establishment of Delhi Sultanate. A major portion of India was under the political control of sultans up to the 18th C. It was through various avenues, as traders, as Sufis, and as attachments to conquerors that the people associated with Islam had come to India⁸. And they settled here and married locally.

The Delhi Sultanate and Mughal dynasty largely influenced the political, economic and cultural basement of India. As a ruling class, the culture of royal court is highly influenced the cream of the society irrespective of their religion. The interaction of Muslim culture with the Hindu way of life gave rise to a sort of a common Indian culture. Muslims and their customs and traditions got influenced, in a great way, by indigenous culture. Intercourse and living together of both communities for many centuries definitely influenced each other. The Sufi tradition played a major role in bridging these communities. Moreover, 'those

from across the Arabian sea who settled as traders along the West Coast and married in to the existing local communities - the *Khojas* and *Bhoras* of Western India, the *Nawayaths* of Konkon, and the *Mappilas* of Malabar assumed many of the customary practices of indigenous communities and sometimes even contradicting the social norms of Islam⁹. The interlinkage between Sanskrit Greek and Arabic languages also attest the specific cultural contact.

As a religion of rulers Islam got official patronage and reception and it was cleverly used as tool for their power, when and where required. As there was no single theological school, in Islam, generally accepted throughout the Muslim world, sultans were free to accord the views of Ulema independently. The influential sufis and those who posted as *mufti*, *qadi*, *imam*, *faqih*, and *mujtahid* were entertained by the Sultans. Sunni Islam of Hanafi creed (*madhab*) was recognized by most of the rulers and spiritual authorities of the Delhi Sultanate and the empire of the Great Mughals¹⁰. Those who were deviated from the Sunnism, like Isma'ilis, Shia, Mahdavis and Roshanites, were not treated well and it was, also, due to the threat posed by them against the state¹¹.

The Sufi preachers and saints of medieval India cemented a platform of Hindu –Muslim dialogue. They introduced Islam to the broad masses of the urban population using the concepts, images and legends of local religions and cultural traditions. This led to the certain level of correspondence between the teachings of Islam and the doctrines of *advaita Vedanta* and *between* the preaching of Sufis and Hindu mystics like Naths, Sants and Bhaktas. The religion of Islam and Muslims in Indian subcontinent has specific cultural and sectarian differences comparing to its original land of Arabia. This is also same in case of Muslims of Central Asia and Persia.

As a result of these, many contradictory rituals and practices evolved among Indian Muslims which were alien to textual Islam. Almost all scholars who have worked on Muslim communities in India agree on this term. 'Folk Islam', 'Popular Islam', 'Hinduised Islam', 'Degenerated Islam', 'Census Muslims', 'Nominal Muslim', 'Syncretic Islam' are the terms used to denote the pre-reformed phase of Islamic communities throughout India¹². The family structure, rules governing family, kinship and marriage, rituals and tradition of some of these Muslim group bear marked variation. As Ijas Ahmed noted, most of these have often tended to be closer to the rules associated with the Hindu castes in the region¹³. There is a generally rooted assumption that syncretic beliefs and practices are mere relics and remnants from a pre-conversion cultural substratum¹⁴.

Muslim identity under colonialism

The experience of an individuals' identity in pre-colonial India was totally changed during colonial period. It was the colonial experience which changed the framework of identity of a community. The communities, particularly, religious communities became political. As the identity of a community is linked to a political religion, they try to redefine the particular religion. Here the agents of this political religion were

nationalism and state. They reject diverse and heterogeneous nature of earlier form of religion for their political ends. The colonial administrative mechanism, through its recruitment, education, missionary work, cartography, legal codification and ethnographic classification, contributed to the systematization of a political religion¹⁵. There were many forms of community forms in pre-modern Indian society, but, they were not received a collective and concrete consciousness which were widely used or misused for administrative cause. The policies and discourses of colonial administration constructed such communities and its categories. Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that colonial rule introduced the modern bureaucratic state into India, which employed the typical techniques of government- surveillance and control i.e. India's people were measured, classified and quantified through the census and other information gathering exercises in which invented community categories were central¹⁶. Thus the construction of Hindu and Muslim Identities and its various manifestations restructured the Indian political scenario.

Muslim community consciousness became dominant in the political scenes of the colonial India. As Francis Robinson noted, print capitalism played a major role in fashioning Muslim identity in India. The colonial government had special concern in distributing political and economic privileges among the power seeking community leaders. Actually Muslims in India had never followed a common tradition and culture, though they professed same religion. There reflected regional and linguistic variations of south Asian Islam. The Muslim leaders were different in their views towards the education policies of British government. The orthodoxy was against modern education and they were pride in their past and hatred in western education. Also the British policy makers' perception was that Muslims were not interested in modern education and their officials propagated such views through their publications¹⁷. But the Muslim intelligentsia supported the official view and they found it as the major hindrance for getting government jobs. Sir Sayed Ahmed Khan addressed the matter in different way that Muslims would be unable to contribute creatively to policy making at various levels of public life. Thus the Aligarh trained educated Muslims and traditional landlords played a major role in contributing community identity of Muslims in Colonial India.

Conclusion

The community consciousness and its transformation into communal consciousness have long term impact in the politics of India. The land was divided and the independent India has to afford the burden of colonial modernity. Major section of Indian intelligentsia's agenda was shaped and designed by the trap of the capitalism and they concentrated over the matters related to the communitarian project even after the India's independence. The presence of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru created the major challenge in materializing their communitarian project in India. The other nation, Pakistan, has been still struggling for their existence facing the contradictions from a religious state. The Indian politics changed after the death of Jawaharlal Nehru and the extremist element of cultural nationalism became more dominant in the socio-political life. The ideological implication of colonialism, thus, made a serious attack to the dream of great national leaders for a secular India.

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